

UNITED STATES

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FISH AND WILDLIFE SERVICE

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FAR-TRAVELING BIRDS CROSS THE IRON CURTAIN

A pair of feathered "ambassadors" have launched their own Visitors' Exchange program between the United States and Russia, the Department of the Interior has announced.

A long-legged bird, known as the common crane of Europe and Asia, visited the Bitter Lake National Wildlife Refuge, near Roswell, N. Mex., on March 10, 1961. Two and a half months later, a lesser sandhill crane, banded at the Bitter Lake Refuge January 29, 1960, was reported on a "State" visit at Krasneno, Russia. Krasneno is about 1,100 miles west of Nome, Alaska, and about 5,500 air miles from Bitter Lake.

Actually, migratory birds apparently have been carrying out their own brand of "diplomacy" between the two countries for a long time. Banding returns of the Fish and Wildlife Service's Bureau of Sport Fisheries and Wildlife indicate that in 1939, a Russian-banded bird was recovered in California. Since then, over 100 American-banded birds have been recovered in Russia and over 75 Russian-banded birds have been taken in Alaska and other States.

The majority of birds banded by the Russian Bird Ringing Bureau and subsequently recovered in the United States has been the lesser snow geese. Many of the American bands recovered in Russia also have come from this same species.

In 1960, 47 lesser snow geese were banded by the Russians on Wrangel Island, off the Arctic coast of Siberia. Six of these were recovered in the United States during the following hunting season. In 1961, the Russians increased this program, banding 1,200 lesser snow geese at Wrangel Island. Seventy of these were recovered in Alaska and other States during the next hunting season.

The observation of the common crane of Europe and Asia on the Bitter Lake Refuge last year was the fifth record for this species in North America. The previous records, all in Alaska or Canada, indicate that common cranes occasionally cross the Bering Sea to follow a North American migration route.

Departures and arrivals of lesser sandhill cranes crossing the Bering Strait have been observed for several years. The recovery in Russia of an American-banded lesser sandhill crane confirms the use of an Asian route by some of these birds.

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